

# A Christian Challenge

Luke 14:25-33  
September 4, 2016

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## **INTRODUCTION – THE GOSPEL**

God works in strange ways!

Today's Gospel lesson is a passage I think most ministers want to avoid. We say that God is love but here we have a passage that tells us very clearly that we are to hate. Even worse, we are to hate "father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters,... and even life itself."

### **Hate others? Who wants to follow such a religion?**

But that is what today's lesson tells us to do and we have to deal with it.

## **BIBLICAL CONTEXT**

**Let's take a closer look at what is going on in the story.**

The passage does not stand on its own. It's part of a collection of stories and incidents in Luke 14 that you might have been exploring the past few weeks.

The overarching theme is what it means to be a follower of Jesus. There's the story of healing on the Sabbath – we should be helping others. There's the story of places of honour at a banquet – we should be humble and not think we are better than others. There's the story of the great banquet and the question of how ready and willing are we to accept God's invitation – or will we find excuses?

Today's lesson is a warning. We might be doing the right things; we might have the right attitude; we might be willing to respond to God's invitation – but are we ready to pay the price?

With that question, today's passage marks a shift in the overall story. In the first part of Luke, we have people coming to Jesus, and responding to his message.

Now, however, we see people becoming disillusioned with Jesus, and drifting away from him. From this point on, we will hear more about the growing opposition to Jesus that leads eventually to the last trip to Jerusalem and the cross.

**Being a following of Jesus doesn't always have a happy ending.**

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**From the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have the hindsight of knowing how the story unfolds.** And that helps us to get a better grasp of what today's passage is talking about.

### **Faith is a Habit**

Jesus was a Jew, living in a predominantly Jewish environment. He preached Judaism – a rather liberal form of Judaism but still a form that everyone recognized and accepted as Judaism.

It was easy for Jews to follow Judaism at that time. Faith was pretty much a matter of habit, of doing the rituals, heading to the Temple in Jerusalem for special holy days, and finding a faction that you felt comfortable with. In such an environment, following Jesus was no big deal. People might follow Jesus for a while, and then switch to following another rabbi for a time.

### **Life as Change**

But the world was changing. Opposition to Jesus was increasing – that would lead to his death on the cross and the persecution and killing of his followers.

We also know that within a generation of Jesus' time, Jews rebelled against Rome. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed; many Jews were forced into exile or taken away as slaves. The heart and centre of Judaism was gone. Almost overnight, Sadducees and Pharisees lost their *raison d'être*. The rabbis – teachers of the Law – took over. They re-defined and re-shaped Judaism so that it could survive in the new reality.

Fringe groups, such as Jesus' Judaism, were no longer tolerated within Judaism. That meant Jesus' followers no longer had a place within Jewish ceremonies, holy days, or homes. Jesus' followers had to choose: their families or Jesus.

### **Faith as Intentional**

Jesus' message was ultimately a challenge. He was challenging his followers to move beyond faith as a matter of habit to faith as something deliberate and intentional.

Jesus was challenging them *to think*: "You want to follow me, but have you thought things through? Are you prepared for the bad times that are coming? Are you following me because it's a fad – the popular *in-thing* for today? Or because you really understand what I am saying and the good news I am preaching?"

### **BRIDGE**

It's at this point that we begin to see how relevant the passage is for us today.

### **CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

#### **Faith as a Habit**

Like the ancient Jews, most of us were raised in a country where everyone was a Christian. Canada was established by Christians – our laws – our ways of life ... work week; holidays ... all reflect our Christian roots.

Going to church weekly – or at least for Christmas and Easter – was something most of us accepted as normal. We might not have been the best of Christians and we may not have always remembered to read the Bible or pray before meals, but we still identified ourselves as Christian.

We learned the major stories of the Bible. We've heard about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Garden of Eden, Noah's ark, Moses and the Ten Commandments. We recognize references to them in music, literature and films.

Christianity surrounded us and, like the ancient Jews, it was easy for our faith to become a matter of habit. Something there when we needed it; some good celebrations at certain times of the year; and forgotten the rest of the year. We didn't have to think what it meant to be a Christian. We didn't have to know about our history or what made Presbyterians different from other Christians.

#### **World is Changing**

But today, the situation is quite different. Our world has changed.

It's not just that more non-Christians have made Canada their home but rather also that North America, including Canada, has become more secular. The Church is no longer the centre of people's lives.

Many Christians don't know their stories – and, if they aren't coming to Church or reading the Bible, they never learn. What we are discovering at university is a whole group of young adults who don't know the biblical stories and so are missing those references in literature, film and music: from references to apples and Armageddon to John Lennon's *imagine* to *ET*, *The Lion King*, and *Harry Potter*.

Many of us are all too familiar with criticisms against the church – hypocrisies, self-centredness, condemnations, rejection, and residential schools. But too few of us know about the good we've done – in education, hospitals, food banks, visiting, helping, caring...

We're competing – against people having to work Sunday mornings; against sports events – soccer games, hockey games, etc. – being scheduled for Sunday mornings; against people being so busy during the week

that Sunday mornings may be the only day they can sleep in – or the only day they can do things around the home – and church slips to the bottom of the list.

### **Moving towards Intentional Faith**

And so we find today's gospel lesson challenging us as it did the Jews of old to become more intentional in our faith.

We don't have to worry – at least not yet – about being persecuted for being a Christian, but we do have to worry about how to communicate our importance and relevance to others – how to reach out to those who tend to view us as irrelevant.

Some of you may be saying, "We're doing quite well. We know who we are as Christians and what we need to do." If so, congratulations – do you have insights that you can share with other congregations who aren't so lucky?

Some of you may be saying, "We like the way we are. We've changed enough. We don't want to change any more. **Changing St. Timothy's because the world is changing doesn't necessarily mean throwing out old traditions. It does mean taking the time to better understand those traditions.**

Let me explain. **A Hindu teenager in Toronto** once wrote a letter to the editor about her Hinduism. Being members of a minority religion in Canada, her parents made sure they went to the local Hindu temple as often they could. They made sure that she learned her language, studied Hinduism's Scriptures, and understood what festivals such as Diwali meant and why Hindus celebrated them.

One year, she had the opportunity to go to India and visit some of the sacred shrines. She was there long enough to celebrate some of the festivals and discovered – that Hindus in India didn't know half the stuff about Hinduism that she did. For them, it was an everyday, lived experience. For her, it was something filled with meaning.

**We don't have to throw out traditions if they are important to us.** What we do need to do is understand why they are important and make sure we communicate that to others.

**You've already come a long way towards intentional faith.** After the sermon, you have an affirmation of faith – St. Timothy's affirmation of faith. That's great.

### **Presbytery Ministry Animator**

In another sense, that's where I come in – as Presbytery Ministry Animator.

What is a Presbytery Ministry Animator? Good question. Certainly, it's not someone who has the answers – but it may be someone who knows what questions to ask.

I do have ideas – my background is certainly varied enough that I come to challenges with out-of-the-box approaches – but where I want to start is finding out where congregations see themselves and helping them discover their intentionality, if they need help in that direction – and helping them find their voice for a changing world.

I know that many see my job as working almost exclusively with the youth. But the youth are only one part of the church.

- What about people who are already active in the church – but need some support?
- What about those who *used to be active*? What happened? How can we reach them?
- How can we reach our neighbours? Newcomers into the community?
- How can we get our story across?
- How do we deepen our relationship with God?

- How do we respond to those who think we're irrelevant, or the source of all the world's problems and violence?
- How do we heal a broken world?

So, over the next few months, you will be hearing from me. I'll keep you posted on what I'm doing – and hopefully working with you in some capacity.

### **CONCLUSION**

Of course, the answers to my questions are simple. Everything begins and ends with God. God is already at work – in us, in others, and working behind the scenes.

The invitation Jesus offered the ancient Jews is one he offers us. The challenge of moving from a faith lived as a habit to a deliberate and intentional faith is one we recognize and are meeting – have met – to some extent.

Place God above everything else? Family, friends, Sunday jobs, sports activities?

We're lucky – we can avoid the question, at least for the time being. We live in a country where we don't to choose between life and faith. We don't run the risk – so far – of being killed for being a Christian.

Placing God above everything and everyone else is still a struggle for most of us. It's a challenge that we're likely to fail at.

And that's OK. We're not perfect. God isn't finished with us yet. Knowing those two facts keeps us humble. Knowing them keeps us open to God working in us and through us. And with God, all things are possible.

AMEN